

“Do not plow with an ox and a donkey together.” (22:10)

Being sensitive to the feelings of another human being is a requisite for defining *mentchlichkeit*, humanness. While many of us go out of our way to be kind and thoughtful when it affects the feelings of a prominent individual, we often ignore the sensitivities of a common person. The Torah provides us with a penetrating insight regarding this inappropriate practice. We are adjured not to plow with an ox and a donkey together. Although the Torah does not suggest a reason, the *Daas Zekeinim* explains that these two animals have two diverse habits for digesting their food. Because an ox chews its cud, bringing up the food it has already swallowed and chewing it again, the donkey who is harnessed with the ox will feel bad that the ox is eating “once again” while it has nothing to eat. Even the sensitivities of a simple animal play a role in the Torah. The reason is simple: when we stop caring about animals, similarly, we will soon stop caring about people. A Jew is enjoined to care, to be sensitive to the needs of others, certainly not to hurt another person – even indirectly.

The great gaon, Torah scholar and posek, halachic arbiter, Horav Moshe Feinstein, z.l., was a person who exemplified caring for another Jew. Countless stories recount his sterling character and empathy for all people, regardless of their background or station in life. To hurt another person was the farthest thing from his mind. He took great pains to see to it that he never infringed upon another person. One very beautiful story, which this author recently heard, tells of Rav Moshe’s anxiety prior to heart surgery. He was concerned about what he could have done to catalyze this pain. How could he have hurt someone in such a manner that he would be subject to such a consequence? Indeed, his anxiety alone bespeaks his saintliness and virtue. After much introspection, Rav Moshe concluded that when he was a young boy in cheder, his rebbe asked the class a question to which he immediately responded, before anyone even had a chance to raise their hand. He realized now that the little satisfaction that he enjoyed in surpassing the others to answer first was the origin of his current pain. Veritably, there is very little one can add to such a story. Imagine, this was the only incident that Rav Moshe could think of in which he might have encroached upon another person’s feelings. How far are we from this plateau!

Another episode cited by Rabbi Pesach Krohn, recalls the sensitivity towards his fellowman exhibited by a quiet, kind, and unassuming Jew, a Holocaust survivor, who came to this country as a teenager. Money did not come easily as he struggled throughout his life to eke out a meager livelihood to support his family. When he was older, retired from his daily endeavor to earn a livelihood, he would always carry a roll of quarters with him. No one knew the reason for this seemingly strange behavior. It was only after his death that the reason was revealed.

Every morning as he davened in shul, he would be approached by poor people seeking alms. Most people gave change in various denominations. This individual felt that if he would take out a dollar bill, intending to ask for change, the poor man might momentarily think that he was being given a dollar instead of his usual change. This fleeting hope would be quickly shattered. Rather than play with another person’s emotions, he made it a point to always carry correct change for his daily

contributions.

While we have just related two beautiful narratives about unique individuals, one a Torah giant, the other a simple Jew, we cannot ignore the fact that not everyone attains this noble plateau. The following story demonstrates the nadir of insensitivity, how low a person can sink in showing total disregard for another person's feelings. Yet, the story plays a secondary role to the statement issued by the founder of the Mussar movement, Horav Yisrael Salanter, z.l.

There was a custom in the city of Vilna that when a wealthy person married off his child, the wedding would take place amidst pomp and majesty in the main thoroughfare of the city. This "hall" was the sole privilege of the most wealthy, who were the community's primary supporters. It was known that if a wedding took place in this locale, it was the affair of a wealthy person. No poor person would ever think of celebrating his wedding there.

It happened once that a man who recently became rich made a wedding for his daughter in the city's main square. This man, who only yesterday had been an itinerant shoemaker, did not endear himself to Vilna's "old money." This arrogant class of human beings were disgusted by this nouveau-riche's attempt to include himself in their elite society. One of these wealthy individuals made it a point to go over to the father of the bride and publicly humiliate him: "How much does it cost to fix my torn pair of shoes?" he asked him in front of his distinguished guests.

When Rav Yisrael Salanter heard of this outrage, he said, "I am sure that the Torah leadership of that community is being judged once again by the Heavenly Tribunal." What a penetrating statement! Those responsible for the spiritual development of their generation must realize the extent of their responsibility. They will be called to task for not educating a member of their community in character refinement. This liability is eternal. In other words, death does not abrogate their responsibility.